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## THE EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITY OF HIGH-SCHOOL ENGLISH

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To the student of educational conditions, the American high school offers at the present moment a most interesting problem. A period of radical reconstruction is drawing to a close. An era of organization is at hand. Just as the reconstruction was brought about by forces beyond the power of the institution and its leaders to stay or withstand, so the imminent process of organization will be shaped by equally powerful and determining factors in our national and social life. The efforts of individual writers and teachers as well as those of institutions and organized bodies will be effective only as they embody a recognition of the significance and meaning of these formative changes. Anyone who attempts to deal with the curriculum of the American high school, or any subject in the curriculum, with any seriousness, proceeds from an analysis, either implicit or avowed, of the educational situation by which he is confronted. It is not, therefore, a proof of unusual courage or of unpardonable naïveté, that one prefaces a discussion of the position of English in the high-school curriculum with the mention and discussion of what he deems the fundamental considerations demanding recognition. It is but natural that, as we think of the late curriculum which has given way to the new, we should ask ourselves what there was good about it, so good that it lasted with but slight variations for four hundred years and served to carry most of the educators of this generation through

the period of their high-school growth. This question has been asked innumerable times, and has received all sorts of answers. Some of these answers, wrought out in the heat of the controversy waged over the subject during the past half-century and more, have become accepted as the standard articles of the creed of the conservative. And just as each answer bade fair to become the answer for the conservative, it became the object of attack by the combined forces of the radicals and innovators. The result of this long controversy is that we are in possession of a number of pretty well-defined educational topics for debate, with a mass of arguments, thoroughly worked out for both the positive and negative sides, with a splendid list of references to literature, educational and otherwise, and with a secondary list of cross-references showing just which argument on the one side is the sure antidote or anti-toxin for its counterpart on the other. To attempt, therefore, to answer this question anew would seem an inexcusable presumption. Nevertheless some sort of answer we must give ourselves. It is simply incredible that there is no bridge from the old to the new. Human experience does not leave off and begin again anew in that fashion. Some things surely we ought to be able to name that were true of the old curriculum which we must expect to find or make true of the new, if it is going to serve its purpose with anything like the success of the old.

Now the discussions of the old curriculum pro and con referred to above have attempted to uncover its worth or inadequacy by showing either what it was or what it did. That is to say, they sought to evaluate it either as *content* or as *function*. It need hardly be pointed out that these two criteria ought not to be separated in their application and, in fact, are not really separable. The only justification, therefore, of the separation is one of practical convenience in making an analysis of a complicated subject. It was a fundamental mistake on the part of the advocates of the old curriculum when they tried to base their claims on either standard of value as independent of the other. The old curriculum was valuable both as content and as function, both for what it was and what it did. When it failed to meet both tests at the same time it was doomed. And this, historically, is just what has happened.

The content of the old course ceased to have the value for the education of the day that warranted its monopoly of the whole field. Losing its peculiar value as educational content, for what it *was*, it was retained for almost a century in spite of constant attacks for its educative function, for what it *did*. Those who believe that *the* new or *a* new curriculum can meet the requirements of the present as well as the old met those of the past, will need to show that the new really takes the place of the old. Those, on the other hand, who look back with regret on the loss of the old, ought, in the interests of education and progress, to be ready to see how the new may be made to do the work of the old. It may be well for us briefly, then, to consider the value of the old curriculum from a broadly educational standpoint.

As an educational instrument the classical curriculum had its own value as content. That is to say, while it brought in its train a series of postponed values, its chief educational value was immediate and vital in the experience of the young students who were working with it. This is not the usual justification offered for use or retention of the classical curriculum. Our educative literature is replete with arguments which seek the value of the classical curriculum in outside and derivative uses. All of these arguments, well known and hackneyed as they are, have just the worth of the claims that they set up. They are true, in fact, but not adequate as supports for continuing the old practice. The classical curriculum at the dawn of modern scholarship and educational endeavor was, historically, the only possible curriculum. It put the student into possession of the languages and literature through the control of which alone one could enter into the social heritage of the day. All the higher interests of mankind were conserved and made available for the modern world in them. Not only had one to seek knowledge there, but standards and ideals. In law, in medicine, in theology, in philosophy, in science, in logic, in rhetoric, in civics, in agriculture, in architecture and engineering, in literature, it was true as it has never been true since, that the way of the classics was the way into life. But this very necessity of going to the classics to get insight into contemporary as well as past life was destined to bring about a development in all lines of human

endeavor that would inevitably make that necessity less and less. The great historic foundations remain as ever in antiquity. But it is less and less necessary to go back to these foundations in order to act effectively, or to live largely within any field of human activity. At the dawn of the modern movement the historical test was the only test of the permanent and stable in the social and scientific realms. Today experimentation in both fields has wrought out new methods of investigation and new criteria of value. Then, the past gave not only the history of the problem, but its solution as well. Today, the past yields only the history of the problem; its solution is attained by the use of new methods. This is another way of saying that we have built up a modern culture, with its roots in the past, to be sure, but of sufficient independence and novelty to warrant and demand our first concern. Under these modern conditions, therefore, the claim that the old curriculum should be retained as a basis for professional or cultural training is quite a different claim from that which might have been set up even a century ago. The classical curriculum has not the social value as content that it once had. What *educational* value as content it possessed and still possesses will be brought out later.

When the consciousness of this changed situation extended to the professional educators, the line of defense was shifted from the content of the curriculum to its educational function, from what it *was* to what it *did*. The result was the long-established and highly honored argument as to the disciplinary value of the old curriculum. The classical curriculum trained a student's mind as no other subjects or subject could. It is not necessary for us to discuss the various forms of this argument. Like the argument for content, it had its foundation in fact, but was not destined to prove adequate. As a matter of strategy, it was a fatal move on the part of those who offered it, in that it risked the outcome of the battle on the outcome of a minor movement. The opponents of the doctrine of discipline transferred the discussion to the field of psychology, where the battle seems now to have taken on a somewhat modified form. But the issue of this latter contest is of little moment for the present discussion, inasmuch as the problem it raised has been shoved aside as immaterial rather than settled.

For all along the adherents of the old curriculum have been aware that there was a larger and truer basis for their claims than was comprised in any one of their arguments taken singly, or in all of them put together.

With this brief review of the century-long effort to work out a defensible theory of the educational value of the classical curriculum, we return to our former statement that that value was inherent and realized in the experience of the student while occupied with it. This means that its content was not valuable because it could be useful at some other time and in some other activity, however true that might prove to be; that its function in the life of the student was not to store up a fund of discipline to be available in other situations, even if that might be. The old curriculum supplied a content to, and performed a function in the experience of, the student that was unique, immediate, and permanent, and this service made that curriculum truly educative. Let us try to realize what that service was.

There are three fundamental features of the old curriculum which made it educative, independent of time or condition. The first of these is that it was a *humanistic* education. In the last analysis, there is no other education than a humanistic education. This is not a mere tautology, or a straining after rhetorical effect. The whole process of education is a learning by experience. Part of that experience is direct, immediate, and individual. Part is indirect, mediate, and social. Our direct experience comes to us through direct contact with our physical or social world. The objects are the stimuli which give rise to our images and ideas. Limited to direct experience, we should live within the range of our own physical habitat, organize our impulses as our own environment dictated, and fashion our ideals with at best a provincial outlook. Indirect experience comes to us refined and organized by the efforts and aspirations of others, reveals to us the meaning and scope of our inmost springs of action, and places at our disposal the ideals of the race. Direct experience gives us the indispensable raw material of life. Indirect experience interprets, evaluates, organizes this raw material. Now, these two kinds of experience do not come to us as two, each referred to its source and

carefully discriminated. It is all one continuous experience, save as we adopt critical attitudes of reflection, or artificial attitudes of research and investigation. Education is the process of insuring to the individual an adequate supply of both types of experience so that he may live a larger, better life. The history of education reveals movements in the direction of increasing the one or the other, when the two have got out of balance. The modern movement with its slogan of "things not words" had its rise in a period when the schools had failed to insure to the pupils adequate direct experience. So our emphasis on motor-training and science is but a refined and up-to-date method of recognizing in our school practice this fundamental need. And let us not only acknowledge but insist once for all that the sciences are indispensable methods of control of experience and therefore an indispensable part of any education. Nevertheless, we must recognize that these same sciences deal each with a certain range of experience and with certain methods of control to secure definite and particular ends. No one science attempts the task of fitting its own result into the total of the experience of the individual. Nay, even our psychology does not attempt this for the pupil. We have our child psychology, our genetic psychology, our educational psychology or psychologies. They are written for teachers. They aim at a system of control of child life from outside; they give us an art of manipulation. Meantime, the children live and learn to live. They borrow the experience of others and test it in their own. They learn the meaning and value of their experiences as they find it reflected in that of others. Now, the truest and most intimate form in which the experience of others is communicated to us is that of language. Even for objects and events of the outer world, while it does not take their place in direct experience, language gives us the best account of them as experienced. And for our feelings, our aspirations and longings, our resolutions and intentions, language alone carries them out into the world of our fellow-men. We can compare our own inner life with that of others only through the meaning of language. For this reason alone, we may rest confident that the education of the young will always consist in adequate measure of the study of language. But why not get language training in

discussing history, mathematics, science, and what not? Certainly the language is used in dealing with these experiences. More than that cannot be expected. But life is bigger, even for a child, than the sciences. It does not go on for him in terms of the sciences. His life is a total, a whole. Break it up for explanation and control, if you will, into experiences regulated and explained by the sciences. It will go on as before as a whole. We have not the sciences available to explain it piece by piece, much less the total as it shifts and changes. Now, the form in which language best preserves and makes available the experience of others is literature. We need fix no limits to the meaning of this word. Let it stand as indicating what is written and accessible. The principle holds good. If it is scientific experience that we want, we may turn to the *Journal of Mathematics*, the *Chemische Annalen*, the *Astro-physical Journal*. If we wish to know how men have thought, felt, and aspired, we turn to literature. And we need take no man's word for the truth of the account. The world has subjected it to its age-long test and given its *imprimatur*. So literature is the truest and most universal method of communicating experience; not all kinds of experience, but that kind that we all most need in youth, in manhood, and in old age to enable us to identify ourselves with our kind, to detect the peculiar likeness of another's life to ours, to find the revelation of our yet unformed resolves in the governing ideals of another's mind. It was because the classical curriculum, as organized and administered, in spite of patent defects and short-comings on the part of its advocates, did thus enlarge, ennoble, and refine the lives of the young, that it survived the attacks of its opponents as well as the defenses of its friends. Whatever educational means is adopted in its place must meet this supreme test: it must *humanize* those who come under its influence.

The second characteristic of the old curriculum lies in the fact that it provided for *continuity* of experience. It would hardly seem necessary to enter into an exposition of this fundamental educational requirement. Whatever may be said in criticism of the old curriculum as organized, or administered, the fact remains that for a number of years the minds of the pupils dealt with a material



which provided unlimited opportunity for utilizing their past achievement and attainment in the solution of new problems, so that each new solution gave the satisfaction of victory and the immediate realization of meaning and value. The result was not merely a relative mastery of a given subject-matter, but a sense of power, a self-mastery. The argument here is not that no other curriculum could be devised which would produce this result, nor that the old curriculum was better adapted to this end than any other conceivable or actual curriculum, but that the classics as studied did, as a matter of fact, provide this continuity of effort and experience. Moreover, no modern curriculum can be regarded as a substitute which fails to measure up to this requirement. One of the unhappy results of the piecemeal fashion in which the modern course of study has been introduced is that this principle has been overlooked. Each new study has been accepted on the basis of its own individual value, whether great or small, while but little or no regard has been paid to the system that was destroyed, or to the chaos that was introduced. By way of contrast, call to the mind the mosaic of the modern course as fashioned by conflicting interests or determined by the pupil under the elective system, and the advantage of the old, in this respect, will be apparent.

The third characteristic of the old curriculum was its *organizing* power. It should be recognized that this power grew largely out of the two facts that have already been discussed. Nevertheless, it is distinguishable as a result in the mind of the pupil, and serves to emphasize a fundamental requirement to be demanded of any substitute. Organization of the individual is the end of education viewed as a process of growth. Between birth and the attainment of essential maturity, the instincts, impulses, capacities, tastes, ideals of the individual must be brought into some sort of a working system. The pupil through his school experience must be got together. He must be made conscious of his own control over himself. It would be foolish to claim that no other school curriculum could produce this result. It would be equally absurd to deny that one can attain to such an organization of one's self without any schooling. The contention is that for centuries the use of the

old curriculum had this very patent effect for those who passed through it. Perhaps this fact, more than any other, accounts for the tenacity with which those who were educated under the old system maintained its value in the face of the fiercest criticism. Men came out of the experience organized. They might be confused by the challenge to show the utility of the specific knowledge gained. They might be embarrassed by the consciousness of ignorance in new and important fields. What they did have was a sense of self-knowledge and self-mastery, the ability to take *themselves* over into new situations. So long as the knowledge they gained in school was the knowledge that the world wanted, this more essential result of their training was obscured. For this reason, the men trained in the old system were men able to take their whole selves as organized over into the new fields of the sciences and do constructive pioneer work. For the same reason the modern attack on the disciplinary result of the older studies is quite beside the mark. Whether we shall finally decide that power in one line is transferable or not; whether we shall prove that a habit of doing one thing can, presto change, be made to function as a habit of doing something else or not, the fact is that the man trained under the old system could work effectively under the demands of the customary world and hold himself together while remaking habits to meet new situations. And this ability is the fundamental index of power. If a new system, or the new system, of education can effect this result while it fits the young directly for the demands of the modern world, it will indeed be a substitute for the old.

Assuming as true what seems to be a fact, that the old curriculum has passed away as the typical curriculum for the high school, we naturally ask what study or studies can most nearly and really take its place. It is the purpose of this paper to indicate the writer's belief that a course in English alone can be expected to do the three things for the pupils that have been mentioned as the merits of the old curriculum. It would hardly seem necessary to argue the point further. It need scarcely be said that this suggestion does not imply the elimination of the newer subjects from the curriculum, nor their subordination to English. It simply means

that the course of study must have a backbone and that English, as we understand the term in the schools, is the only subject that performs this peculiar function. It alone, as literature, can make the course a humanizing agency. It alone offers the opportunity for that continuity of work which makes study educative. It alone is capable of bringing to bear on the pupil that kind of experience, indirect though it be, by which his forming mind and soul may be organized.

The English teachers of America ought to recognize this distinct opportunity. One ought not to apologize to himself for teaching a language, for language is the medium of social expansion and social efficiency. Nor ought one to underestimate the educative value of the vernacular. The English language and literature reflect a life and development within which have been wrought out our standards of taste, our ethical and spiritual ideals, our most permanent judgments, our highest resolves. Because of this weight of sifted experience, it is not only the most accessible, but also the most valuable, language and literature for those who are going to be Americans. No one will be found to deny this. To those who still believe that the best entrance into this inheritance is through some other language or literature, the only answer is, the data for a final decision are not at hand, but that the presumption is against them. At any rate, English is the language of the great social group to which we belong, it is available for all sorts and conditions of pupils, it has within it unique possibilities as an educational instrument. It is not only the privilege but also the duty of educators and teachers to learn how to use this instrument as the old masters of the classics used theirs to equip men and women for the modern world.